

Voices
from the
GapsGish
Jen

“

Beautiful wife, beautiful daughter, beautiful house, oven can clean itself automatically. . . If John lived in China, he would be very happy. But he is not happy. Even at the gym things go wrong. One day, he pull a muscle. Another day, weight room too crowded. Always something.

— Who's Irish?

”



Biography

Gish Jen was born in Scarsdale, New York, in 1955. She is a second generation Chinese American and a graduate of Harvard University, where she earned a degree in English. Becoming a writer for Gish Jen was not an easy task. In the beginning, Jen had trouble convincing her parents that it was a worthwhile career. Gish is her chosen pen name, a pseudonym she created while on an archaeological dig in Pennsylvania for the National Science Foundation. Her real name is Lillian, and she chose the name Gish after a silent-screen actress of the same name. When asked if her writing should be considered autobiographical, Jen answered by saying, “It is and it isn’t. A fellow writer described my situation when he said that making fiction is like making soup. There’s lots of different ingredients: some of the ingredients come from your life; some come from things you’ve read, or from other people’s lives; many, many things you’ve just made up.” Jen is not concerned with the ingredients, but only with how the “soup” turns out in the end.

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1955
- * Chinese-American novelist and short story writer
- * Her first published novel is *Typical American*

This page was researched and submitted by Erika Canion, Stephanie Johnson, Kristyna Nazar, and Keisha Ritchie on 5/24/00.



Gish Jen

Biography continued

Jen's work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, and *The New York Times*, as well as in a variety of anthologies, including *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*. She has also published two books, *Typical American* (1991) and *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996). Her first book was a *New York Times* notable book of the year and a finalist for the National Book Critics' Circle Award. *Mona in the Promised Land*, its sequel, was also a *New York Times* notable book. In addition, it was named one of the 10 best books of 1996 by the *Los Angeles Times*. A collection of short stories, *Who's Irish?*, was published in 1999.

In her novel *Typical American*, Jen revisits a character (Ralph Chang) from one of her short stories, "In the American Society." The novel charts Chang's progress through his life. His character is a struggling young man who has high hopes after immigrating from China to the United States, only to be found later in the depths of despair. This changes when his long lost older sister Theresa finds him later in the story. Ralph Chang and his sister Theresa had both immigrated to America separately and happen to meet again by chance. The Chang's were in pursuit of the American dream. In addition, two of her other stories are interwoven into this novel: "What Means Switch" and "The Water-Faucet Vision." *Typical American* focuses on their adoption of the American culture and values that they had initially despised.

The sequel, *Mona in the Promised Land*, continues the story of the Chang family, but instead centers on the life of Ralph's teenage daughter, Mona. Mona is in the midst of converting to Judaism. The novel has been praised for its recognition of ethnic identity, as well as cultural diversity.

Gish Jen "is an essential writer for our time—a writer who moves and entertains us as she updates the American Dream." The title story of the collection, *Who's Irish?*, focuses on an elderly Chinese woman who is puzzled by the attitudes of her Americanized daughter, Natalie, and her unemployed Irish-American son-in-law, John Shea. After her daughter and son-in-law have a child together, John and his brothers comment on the baby's skin color. The grandmother is represented as a feisty character and quickly gets rid of this "brown" talk by suggesting that maybe John is not her real father.



Gish Jen

Biography continued

In Jen's work, she combines the adolescent's search for self with the larger search for cultural identity. Not only does she focus on her own Chinese American ethnic background, the author also includes work on Jewish Americans, African Americans, and Irish Americans, as well as other groups. According to Ann Beattie, Jen's "characters seem to be trying on their lives for size: discomfiting to observe, though at the same time, offering the reader a sadness convincingly tinged with humor." In addition, many of her writings reflect her childhood experiences growing up in Scarsdale, NY. The common themes the writer employs include stories of immigration, assimilation, and occasional tensions with other ethnic communities. The American dream is also an important aspect to her work. "I can say that the American dream is much more complicated than you would think. I think I'm just trying to capture some of that complexity."



Gish Jen is currently living in Cambridge, Massachusetts with her husband, her son Luke, and her new daughter, Paloma Jen O'Connor. The author is still deciding whether or not to write another novel or to continue writing short stories. She has made great accomplishments for her ethnic community and has gained honorable recognition for her works. At this time, she is enjoying her time as a mother.



Gish Jen

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